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Viewing cable 09CARACAS692, EXPLAINING VENEZUELAN ACQUIESCENCE

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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09CARACAS692	2009-06-05 15:12	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Caracas

Appears in these articles:

<http://www.semana.com/nacion/wikileaks-venezuela-tumbos-oposicion-chavez-segun-eeuu/158452-3.aspx>

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PP RUEHAG RUEHROV RUEHSR
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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CARACAS 000692

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/04/2019
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SUBJECT: EXPLAINING VENEZUELAN ACQUIESCENCE

CARACAS 00000692 001.2 OF 004

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,

REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. President Chavez's efforts to concentrate more power in his hands and undermine the democratic opposition have been met in Venezuela with more acceptance and resignation than outrage and resistance. There are numerous, credible theories to explain Venezuelans' acquiescence to an increasingly authoritarian government ranging from Chavez's charismatic leadership and popular social programs to the fear, fatigue, and ineffectiveness that prevail among government opponents. Moreover, the majority of Venezuelans, long reliant on their petro-state's largesse, appear to prioritize "social rights" and self-preservation over abstract civil liberties. The enormous, corporatist Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) is for many citizens both an irreplaceable provider and exclusive source of information. Finally, Chavez has also effectively and systematically squelched any opposition to his rule either from within his ranks or from other political parties. While Chavez's popularity may gradually erode as he radicalizes and the local economy worsens, the Venezuelan president still appears well positioned to keep accelerating his Bolivarian revolution at the expense of remaining democratic institutions. End Summary.

----- Increasing Authoritarianism -----

¶2. (C) Since winning the February 15 referendum eliminating term limits, President Chavez has accelerated his Bolivarian revolution, further undermining political and economic freedoms in Venezuela. In recent months the Chavez government has clamped down on leading opposition members while simultaneously using the National Assembly to close off any possible avenue for the opposition. The GBRV pressed a corruption case against former Defense Minister Raul Baduel and Maracaibo Mayor and 2006 consensus opposition presidential candidate Manuel Rosales. Baduel is awaiting trial in a military prison; Rosales fled to Peru. The National Assembly passed laws that allowed the central government to take control over highways, ports, and airports previously controlled by state governments. The Chavez government selectively applied the measure in states run by opposition governors.

¶3. (C) In addition, the National Assembly created a new presidentially appointed position to run Caracas, removing virtually all responsibilities and funding from the recently elected opposition mayor of Caracas. A law expanding this model to opposition-led states is reportedly in the works. The National Assembly is also actively considering a law that would give Chavez's PSUV party a significant advantage in the allocation of seats in legislative elections. Moreover, the National Electoral Council intends to suspend any elections until work on the draft law is complete. Chavez recently threatened to close Globovision, the only remaining opposition-oriented television network, and GBRV officials are pressing charges against Globovision's president. The GBRV also nationalized over 50 oil service companies and has not yet offered swift and equitable compensation. The GBRV has also intervened in the food industry, nationalizing a plant owned by U.S. agribusiness giant Cargill and occupying a second, as well as nationalizing land owned by FEMSA, the Mexican company that bottles and distributes Coca-Cola in Venezuela.

¶4. (C) The opposition's response to these measures has been muted. On May 1, the Caracas Metropolitan Police quickly dispersed a relatively small crowd of opposition marchers with tear gas. There were far more Venezuelans stuck in beach traffic during that long weekend than took to the streets in defense of their liberties. University students and faculty led an inconsequential march of several thousand to the Ministry of Education on May 20 primarily to protest higher education budget cuts. Fewer than five thousand persons participated in a May 27 protest against the

threatened shut down of Globovision. Moreover, Chavez continues to enjoy considerable support in the polls, despite growing public dissatisfaction with key issues, such as crime and inflation. Prominent pollster Alfredo Keller told us recently that Chavez is slipping in the polls, but still enjoys roughly 60% support; Luis Vicente Leon of Datanalysis put Chavez's popularity at over 54% as of April. Edmond Saade of Datos also confirmed recently that Chavez enjoys majority support and far more support than any other public figure.

Hope and Purchasing Power

15. (C) There are numerous reasons why Venezuelans are acquiescing to Chavez's anti-democratic measures. The charismatic Venezuelan president conveys far more hope to voters than any of his competitors. State media outlets constantly laud government initiatives, social programs, and "achievements of the revolution." Chavez himself regularly launches building projects, opens government cooperatives, or announces expropriations on his weekly "Alo, Presidente" radio and television talk show. While government critics rightly point out that many of the GBRV's projects are unsustainable, inefficient, or corrupt, local pollsters point out that Venezuela's poor report that they have more money in their pockets. Large numbers of Venezuelans also avail themselves of GBRV social programs, most commonly shopping at subsidized Mercal or Pdval stores, or receiving medical care courtesy of the Barrio Adentro program. "At least Chavez has given us something," is prevalent local sentiment among sectors of society long reliant on government largesse ("Papa estado").

Class Resentment and Social Rights

16. (C) Chavez has also reaped political gains by stoking class antagonisms in stratified Venezuela. Railing against local "oligarchs," the Venezuelan president aims most of his economic "reforms" at large, and often foreign, enterprises. Although the vast majority of Venezuelan still support private property protections, there is little popular sympathy for big business in Venezuela, and as yet, little public recognition of the long-term economic effects of driving out foreign investment. Moreover, Chavez's core supporters believe that they would lose anything gained over the last decade if Chavez were to fail. Chavez has sought to reassure his base that he is not undermining their economic freedoms. One week after seizing large tracts of farmland in his native state of Barinas, Chavez distributed property titles last week to urban squatters in a televised ceremony. Local pollsters note that in this context most Venezuelans prioritize "social rights" over civil liberties. They tend to be more attracted to Chavez's promises of redistribution of wealth than alarmed by his concentration of power.

Frog in a Teflon Pot

17. (C) To explain Venezuelans' relative docility, many pundits also cite the analogy that a live frog placed in boiling water will try to escape, but if placed in water gradually heated up, it will die unsuspectingly. The Venezuelan president reportedly leans heavily on polls and has carefully calibrated the pace of change so as not to get too far in front of public opinion. Chavez has paused in the face of opposition to politically charged education overhaul, a Counterintelligence Law, and the proposed anti-NGO Law of International Cooperation. He accepted a narrow electoral defeat in the December 2007 constitutional referendum, but later enacted many of the proposed reforms through a compliant legislature. He also subsequently won acceptance for the elimination of term limits in the February 2009 referendum.

¶8. (C) With full control over all other branches of government, Chavez usually succeeds in imposing his will through ostensibly "legal" means. Constitutional experts' arguments to the contrary tend to get lost on most voters. For example, most Venezuelans are far more concerned about obtaining good government services than they are interested in a debate as to whether the central government or state and local governments should provide such services. When Venezuelans do express dissatisfaction with the government, they tend to blame Chavez's ministers and other senior officials rather than Chavez himself. This holds true despite the fact that Chavez selects all senior GBRV officials and generally rotates a small, closed circle of confidants to key positions.

What Opposition?

¶9. (C) Some local pundits call the political opposition Chavez's best ally. Ten years after Chavez was first elected, the democratic opposition is still talking about the need to articulate a politically attractive, democratic alternative. Opposition parties regrettably are still mostly personalist vehicles with no discernible party platforms. Moreover, almost all opposition parties are relatively strong in specific regions and lack a genuine nationwide presence. With few exceptions, most opposition leaders have focused on criticizing Venezuela's Teflon president rather than engage in much-needed grassroots organizing among Venezuela's poor. Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) enjoys a virtual monopoly in Venezuela's countryside. Moreover, opposition parties continue to squabble among themselves, and there is currently no single opposition leader who enjoys anything approaching the popularity of Chavez.

¶10. (C) Opposition parties failed to unite in a few key gubernatorial and numerous mayoral races in November 2008, allowing Chavez's United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV) to win races the PSUV otherwise would have lost. Opposition parties have not yet agreed on a methodology to pick unified candidates for the 2010 parliamentary elections (they foolishly boycotted the 2005 elections). At the same time, the central government is actively hampering opposition-led states and municipalities to prevent elected opposition leaders from building democratic alternatives to Chavismo. The student movement injected new life into the opposition Q 2007, but student politics are inherently transitory. Numerous student leaders have formally entered politics and visible student activism has declined. Pro-Chavez dissidents, for their part, have not made much of a dent at the polls so far.

Fear Matters

¶11. (C) Chavez has also spun what pollster Luis Vicente Leon calls a "web of fear." Rather than engage in wholesale repression, the GBRV has made examples of prominent sector leaders that have had a chilling effect on the rest of civil society. For example, the GBRV closed RCTV, launched investigations into electoral NGO Sumate, and recently sentenced three former Caracas police commissioners to 30-year prison terms for their alleged role in the short-lived 2002 coup. Chavez regularly vilifies selected Catholic bishops and personally announced that Manuel Rosales would be jailed even before charges were brought against him. Opposition activists receive pointed, threatening phone calls (one former ambassador was told, "We know you have only one kidney.").

¶12. (C) The GBRV also allows pro-Chavez thugs, most notably the "La Piedrita" and "Alexis Vive" collectives, to engage in political violence with impunity. In a society awash in conspiracy theories, Venezuelans are inclined to believe the GBRV is omnipotent. Moreover, the GBRV has relied heavily on

"litmus lists." Whether you signed the presidential recall referendum drive ("Tascon List") or are among the five million voters who purportedly registered with Chavez's PSUV party can determine whether or not you have access to government services, loans, scholarships, or can even obtain a passport.

Been There, Done That

¶13. (C) Opposition leaders concede that only a small minority of Venezuelans are inclined to attend protest marches or political rallies. They note that many Chavez opponents are discouraged by the fact that street protests have done little to change Chavez's decisions or undermine his popularity. Massive opposition rallies in 2002, the 2002-2003 general strike, and the presidential recall referendum drive did not succeed in forcing Chavez from power (except for three days during the April 2002 interregnum). Rosales' 2006 presidential campaign mobilized large opposition rallies, but Rosales polled only 37% of the vote. Student-led protests in 2007 did not dissuade the GBRV from shuttering RCTV, nor do they appear to be deterring the GBRV from going after Globovision. Student leaders recently conceded to us that their street power is only "effervescent."

Accommodation and Plan B

¶14. (C) In the absence of hope for change, many Venezuelans, including business and professional elites, have found ways to accommodate themselves to the Bolivarian revolution, or at a minimum, to avoid political risks. Because the GBRV regulates and dominates the domestic economy so much, private sector leaders argue they have little choice but to find ways to "get along" in order to survive and prosper. Opposition political parties report that contributions from the private sector have virtually dried up. Moreover, large numbers of well educated and skilled Venezuelans have chosen flight over fight. The Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese embassies have all experienced a boom in citizenship claims. Millions of Venezuelans have claims to citizenship in EU countries due to massive European immigration in the 1950's. These Venezuelans tend to be middle class, multilingual, and better-educated, making emigration a viable alternative to confronting Venezuela's political and economic problems. There is a six-month backlog for U.S. non-immigrant visa interview appointments. Jewish community leaders report that their small community has been devastated by the emigration of the younger generation.

The Media Monopoly

¶15. (C) Many Venezuelans appear to be unaware of Chavez's concentration of more power in his hands because the GBRV exerts a virtual monopoly over the news. Chavez closed RCTV, the only free-to-air network critical of the GBRV in May 2007, and opposition-oriented cable news network Globovision is only free-to-air in Caracas and Valencia. Six state television channels laud Chavez and cheerlead his Bolivarian revolution while the remaining free-to-air networks exercise considerable self-censorship. The GBRV also controls a wide network of community radio stations and sustains a continued socialist ideology campaign via thousands of specially trained promoters. Chavez has also presided over 1200 hours of obligatory TV and radio broadcasts ("cadenas"). Local polling firms all tell us that public opinion is decidedly against further centralization, but most Venezuelans profess to be unaware of Chavez's efforts to undermine elected opposition governors and mayors. Pollsters also note a marked tendency for Chavez's strongest supporters to give unconditional support to their president.

¶16. (C) Despite controlling all branches of government, centralizing economic activity in the government's hands, controlling the information fed to the majority of the population, and enjoying majority support, President Chavez may yet be confronted by new political challenges. Public support for him is likely to erode if the ongoing radicalization of the Bolivarian revolution or an economic downturn begin to erode the purchasing power of his political base. Venezuelans still prefer social democracy to Chavez's ill-defined "Socialism of the 21st Century" by a wide margin and are tired of political polarization, according to local polls.

¶17. (C) Nevertheless, Chavez right now appears to be squarely in the driver's seat. He has recouped personal popularity and survived tough economic times before, including during the 2002-2003 national strike. Moreover, the Venezuelan president has carefully taken the necessary steps to eliminate any real political challenger, and the opposition has yet to present a concrete, attractive alternative to Chavismo. He also fully controls the legislature and judiciary, and with parliamentary elections at least 18 months away, Chavez has plenty of time to develop the legal framework to try to stay in power for as long as he wishes.

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